

Litteræ Minister Generalis
Ordinis Fratrum Minorum

**SOLLEMNITAS
NATIVITATIS
DOMINI NOSTRI
JESU CHRISTI
2009**



The Word of God became flesh

The Gospel of the Father called to be restored

Dear Brothers,
May the Lord give you peace!

VIII Centenary of the Founding of the Order

We are about to bring closure to the jubilee year in which we commemorated 800 yrs since the founding of our Order, approved by the Pope as the *forma vitae*, revealed by the Most High to Francis, and which he, in turn, committed to writing in simple words (cf. *Test* 14, 15). At the end of these celebrations we wish to praise and bless the Most High, Almighty and Good Lord, for the gift of Francis to both the Church and the world. We wish also to thank him for the gift of so many brothers and sisters who, inspired by the Holy Spirit (cf. *Rnb* 2, 1), have faithfully lived in joy and creativity the way of life handed down to us by Francis. Among them the figure of Clare stands out as the *Little Plant* of Francis.

The celebration of the 8th centenary of the founding of the Order of the Lesser Brothers began with an urgent appeal to be refounded, that is, a call to return to the essential, to the basic principles of our charism, and to the roots of our spirituality. At the same time, we are called to recognize, read, and interpret, in light of the Gospel, the signs of the times, for they are like “flashes of light in the dark night of our lives and of our people, lighthouses that generate hope” (*LgP* 6), and pleas which the Spirit makes to us and which ask for a response” (*BGG* 14). Hence, the urgent call to be “reborn” (*Jn* 3:3) resounds strongly in our hearts not to domesticate the prophetic words of the Gospel or to suit them to a comfortable way of life (*LgP* 2), but “to nourish from within, our fragmented and unequal world that is hungry for meaning with the liberating offer of the Gospel just as Francis and Clare of Assisi did in their time” (*LgP* 2); we are called to be evident signs of life for a world that is thirsty for a “new heaven and earth” (*Is* 65, 17; *Ap* 21, 1 [*LgP* 2]). This same call to conversion continues to hound us today, urging us to usher a new era and awaken a new vision of life that is founded on justice, love, and peace (cf. *LgP* 2).

By going back to the essentials, to our roots and foundations, we have found the Gospel. It could not have happened in any other way because our fraternity is rooted and has its origin in listening to the Gospel; and it is Christ who speaks to us through it

(*BGG* 6). By remembering our past with gratitude, we have become more aware that, in order to taste the grace of the origins, to live it passionately, and to embrace the future with hope (cf. *Novo Millemnio Ineunte*, 1), it is necessary to return to the Gospel, and put Christ as the center focus of our lives, for only in this way will our lives be able to recover the beauty, poetry, and enthusiasm of the origins.

We have also come to know by intuition the way that leads us not only to the essential of our experience of faith and spirituality, but also to respond to the deepest yearnings of our society. We have indicated this path with three words: *to center ourselves, to concentrate, and to de-center ourselves*. To *center ourselves* means to center on God who is our All, our Good, All Good, and the Supreme Good as it was for Francis (cf. *Praises of God* 4). This is why we must “keep our hearts constantly turned toward the Lord” (*Rnb* 22, 19) as the *priority of all priorities*. Moreover, we must put aside all obstacles and worries in order to serve, love, and honor the Lord God with pure minds and hearts (cf. *Rnb* 22, 26). This seems to be the greatest challenge during this time of activism, even if it is apostolic. The latter, in fact, can at times come across as an escape to struggle in vain to fill a void in our existence only God can fill.

We are then to *concentrate* on the essential elements of our charism with the goal of avoiding that fragmentation and dispersion, which are very much affecting us. These essential elements, in fact, have already been singled out in the *Priorities* which have been in the forefront since the Chapter of 1997 as “a key reading in order to live our identity and understand the aspirations of the world” (*LgP* 4). The priorities are: *the spirit of prayer and devotion, fraternal life in community, minority, poverty and solidarity, evangelization and formation*; they will continue to walk with us even into this six-year term – as expressed by the Chapter of Pentecost 2009 (cf. *Capitular Mandate* 1). They are not optional values, but values that identify us as Lesser Brothers, pillars of our fidelity to the Gospel, consequences of a radical Gospel way of life just as St. Francis lived them out and proposed them to us in his *proposal of life*.

We must also *de-center ourselves* in order to go to the world, our cloister, and there, *inter gentes*, to proclaim that God alone is Almighty (cf.



Lord, 9). Today, we are aware more than ever that we are not called for ourselves, but for others; and our fraternities are not for themselves alone, but in order to make known the Kingdom of God. We are and want to continue to be *Friars of the people* and, as *bearers of the gift of the Gospel*, to go throughout the world among them.

A Look at the Future

Once we manage to *center* ourselves totally on the Lord, *concentrated* on the fact that we are Lesser Brothers, and *less centered on ourselves*, then we will be able to go about the world *inter gentes* and *ad gentes*. In this way, we will be bringing the Good News in word and deed to all men and women of good will. As a matter of fact, the General Chapter of 2009, in its final document, *Bearers of the Gift of the Gospel*, describes us as “travelling the paths of the world as Lesser Brothers and Evangelizers with our hearts turned to the Lord” (BGG 10). Behold then our program for the present! It is a passionate program for the kingdom and for a future full of hope that involves reliving the charism and making our mission more dynamic. Behold then our commitment for the next few years: to enliven in us that missionary and evangelizing ardor in order to *restore the gift of the Gospel* as center focus within the geographic borders of our own people and, if the Lord wills it, even unto the ends of the earth.

Yes! Aware that “the Gospel is a gift meant to be shared”, we are called to go about the world, crossing borders, going beyond geographical and cultural boundaries, and “make an offer of faith through shared witness” (BGG 11) with all the other agents of evangelization, such as priests, religious, and laity. This is done always while centering on “the Triune God as the integrating principle of our lives, our fraternities and the gift of the brothers” (BGG 12). It is only by seeing through this presupposition of faith that we will be able to understand that evangelizing mission is essentially inherent to our Franciscan vocation (BGG 12). Nothing, therefore, can stop the one who is touched by the power of the Gospel.

This continual effort to cross borders allows us to dwell in the fissures of a fragmented world, marked at times by “discrimination, exclusion, and, in extreme cases, physical, psychic, and ideological violence” (BGG 22). Our history is a history of inculturation and incarnation, especially among the underprivileged. From the perspective of our Franciscan identity, we recognize the urgency to let ourselves be seduced by the forgotten cloisters, the

inhuman cloisters where the beauty and dignity of the human person are constantly sullied (cf. *Rnb* 9, 2 [*LgP* 37]). There is also urgency to choose decisively “places on the borders and margins” (*LSR* 33), but done both from the *logic of the gift* and gratuitous service. Furthermore, we must *restore the gift of the Gospel* as center focus with creativity and fantasy especially to the poor, who are our masters (cf. John Paul II. *Message* 8-2-2004). In light of these principles, we are called to reassess our evangelizing mission and pave the way for unprecedented Franciscan presences and witnesses with clarity and boldness (cf. *LSR* 33. 35).

We need to recognize at this time that the missionary ardor has waned among us in these past years. It is, in fact, poignant to see how inactivism threatens to paralyze the Gospel enthusiasm in some of the brothers and Entities. Certain structures also threaten us from being free to pick up and go to other lands or open new evangelizing presences that are more in keeping with the needs of today. For this reason, the Chapter of 2009 invited us *to be less centered on ourselves* after the pattern of Jesus Christ (cf. *Phil* 2, 6-7); to be *less self-referential*; to be less engrossed on our personal survival; to overcome a provincialist mentality; and to grow, instead, in the sense of belonging to the Order (cf. *BGG* 14. 31).

I am convinced more and more that if we want to respond to our missionary vocation *ad gentes*, if we want our fraternities to be exemplary, prophetic fraternities, and if we want to respond to our missionary vocation *ad gentes*, then we need to restructure our presences and foster a suitable initial and on-going formation from the perspective of an evangelizing mission. For this reason, docility to the Spirit becomes all the more urgent, for the Spirit blows where and how he wills, propelling us into mission and to go and meet our brother and communicate to him the Good News. The careful reading of the signs of the times and of places is likewise urgent. We must allow ourselves to be stirred by them so as to truly incarnate ourselves effectively in the socio-cultural reality of our people and society. More importantly, we are to cultivate a Trinitarian faith and spirituality.

Within this context, we need to be self-critical in the proper way and question ourselves, as the General Chapter 2009 asked us to do, to decipher whether this inactivism and dispiritedness threatens to paralyze any form of evangelization and, perhaps, signals a crisis of faith affecting some of us” (BGG 12). Nevertheless, it is God, the One and Three, who urges us to go out of ourselves toward an encounter with the other, with



that which is different (cf. *LSR* 22). Yet, again, our inactivism, is it not, perhaps, due to a lack of an authentic experience of God? In fact, only “an authentic experience of God can put us in motion, for it is impossible to *sense the infinite embrace of a God who, being love and only love, loves to the extent of folly*, without feeling at the same time the urgent need to share this experience with others” (*BGG* 11). Is it not because we are too centered on ourselves without allowing ourselves to be questioned by phenomenons such as interculturality, claiming and defending human rights, the economic crisis, ecocide, and the spiritual and material poverty around us? (*BGG* 14). Is it not, perhaps, because we are turning our backs to the future of the world when our mission, in fact, is precisely to walk with the world not as one who has answers for everything, but as one who is a mendicant of meaning just like our contemporaries?” (cf. *BGG* 219, *LSR* 6).

It is Christmas!

My dear Brothers, it is Christmas! We have been blessed with a gift, an excellent gift that pours forth from the love of the Father for humanity, namely, “His blessed and glorious Son who is born to us” (*IILF* 11). This Good News we have received as a gift, and which we ought not to appropriate to ourselves, obliges us to restore as center focus “The Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (2 Cel 15); and our Brother Francis did live Christmas as a gift that must be restored as center focus.

Arise! Be on your way!

Ifeel, my dear Brothers, that the Lord is telling us, or rather crying out to us, “Arise! Be on your way! Arise! Be on your way! Heal the

wounds of your world! Help your brothers and sisters in their broken worlds with a plan of mutual peace and justice that is rooted in the Gospel. After the example of the Son of God, empty yourselves and assume the condition of the men and women of your time (cf. Phil 2, 6-7), and like Paul, be all things to all people and do all for the sake of the Gospel (cf. 1Cor 9, 22-23).

Arise! Be on your way! Watch over the Gospel quality of your fraternal life! Ensure that the life of prayer is lived out as an obvious priority, so as to become “schools of prayer” where communication is so clear that it fosters the joyful expression and celebration of your vocation and experience of faith; and where the brothers attend to each other like a mother and with a spirit of discernment.

Arise then! Be on your way! Receive the Gospel in your life! Allow it to dwell in you and it will, in turn, transform your lives as it transformed Francis’, thus making him a *living Gospel* (cf. *BGG* 5). Be nourished by the Gospel, so that your quenched thirst may morph into a message – as was the case with the Samaritan woman (cf. *LSR* 17). Go about the world as a fraternity and in fraternity, yet in minority and from the logic of the gift with Gospel clarity and boldness, in communion with the Church, proclaiming Jesus, who is the Gospel of the Father to all humanity, the manifestation of God’s love, our brother, and the Savior of humanity.

Again, Arise!

Be on your way and

MERRY CHRISTMAS TO EVERYONE!

Rome – December 8, 2009
Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception.
Queen and Mother of the OFM



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